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Let me entertain you?: Some reflexions on the professor as a DJ

Brigitte Biehl-Missal

Reviews Editor

Imagine night clubs, ecstatic crowds and a DJ's pounding bass lines. And now think of a lecture theatre. You see any parallels yet? Well, how about that a DJ is nothing when the crowd does not dance, and a professor is unhappy when students, er, don't feel entertained? On the dark side of the aesthetic development of education to be considered in this editorial there is a definite trend towards entertainment: the *portemanteau* word "edutainment" refers to both education and entertainment and has received critique as some teachers seem to invest more effort in entertaining students rather than educating them (Billsberry, 2014).



A DJ set that I played at a club night in Berlin in front of a student crowd has made me ponder about the relationship between DJs and professors. Being a committed researcher in the organisational aesthetics field, I took part at "[Professorenacht](#)", a regular event in different German cities in which eight or so university lecturers act as DJs in front of about 1000 students in a night club. The slogan is "My Prof is a DJ" ("Mein Professor ist ein DJ") and students seem to like that idea. Indeed, I have to admit that I was pleased by the energetic atmosphere as, during my past decade of university teaching, it has not happened once that I looked at a

thousand ecstatic young people cheering and moving to my tunes. Professorenacht is organised by Gunnar Larsson, an event agency CEO who also is doing a PhD on events and rhetoric. The parallels between DJs and professors are obvious: a prominent person in an elevated position sets the tone and tempo, mixes different topics, theories and papers, or vinyls and mp3s, to – eventually – “move” people. DJs have been referred to as “digital shamans”, “maestros”, and “channellers of energy” (Pfadenhauer, 2009) and some of my traditional colleagues in academia would happily place themselves in similar categories. Other colleagues would emphasise that teaching is about “energy”, “the vibe” and a back-and-forth feedback between not lecturer and audience but participants in a co-created situation.

Researchers have already elaborated on parallels between managers and artists (Degot, 1987), managers and actors (e.g. Biehl-Missal, 2010), and painters, jazz musicians, sculptors, and creative minds of all kinds. Only recently researchers have looked into what managers can learn from conductors, suggesting that relational listening and kinaesthetic empathy is of relevance in management as well (Koivunen and Wennes, 2011). I would guess that explorations of DJ’ing can add to the field because music and dance are about emotions, embodied knowing and energy – issues that are essential in today’s business world and in Higher Education.

My colleagues Steve Taylor and Ralph Bathurst in earlier editorials have pointed to the value of art-based approaches for student learning in comparison to more traditional methods of management education which tend to move to a pre-defined answer. Arts-based methods open up a variety of interpretations, encouraging participants to play with their own associations and explore inner thoughts and feelings, connecting them to and enabling them to apprehend the essence and emotional aspects of concepts and situations, for example in leadership contexts (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009). The arts, in contrast to traditional management, do not have efficiency as their central aim, but in Kant’s words may have a “purposiveness without purpose”, addressing people’s senses to allow for different insights or for enjoyment and entertainment. So when we think of artful ways of teaching, the issue of entertainment may be its dark side.

Edutainment as entertainment designed to educate is a positive thing at first sight, because an unappealing presentation of theory in most ways fails to engage students, won’t inspire them, and won’t be remembered (Billsberry, 2014). But teaching should not only be fun, it can also be challenging and even painful for students (sometimes for teachers too!) when they need to negotiate and change their values, opinions and behaviour through the course of their studies. In the social sciences and the humanities students should be encouraged to invest time in reading, pondering and working their way through the divergent and incomparable views of theorists, critics and practitioners. That involves backlashes, frustration and doubts. Arts-based methods such as theatre, sculpture related to business topics, and poetry reading would support this process.

Aesthetic efforts to “entertain” students however can be related to what Böhme (2003) calls an “aesthetic economy” where services are beautified and staged to appeal to our senses. These developments often, in an approach of cultural pessimism, are related to changes in students’ reading and writing habits and attention spans in the era of social media (Billsberry, 2014: 152), but also come from structural changes. In Germany in particular, with an increasing number of fixed-term and temporary contracts for academics, the focus is on publications and gaining research funding, a problem that we see in the UK and the US too. Putting time and effort into the planning and execution of effective teaching often is not high on the list of academics’ priorities. In the US and the UK, teaching is

evaluated, however, by fee-paying students both in class and on websites such as ratemyprofessor.com. Low ratings can terminate careers, prompting lecturers to “entertain” rather than confront and challenge students, refrain from addressing complicated issues and demotivated students (Billsberry, 2014: 152). In this way, an aestheticization of teaching may make life pleasant on the surface but also erodes effective teaching and education that certainly is more than consumption.

A story on the emptiness of entertainment and aestheticized teaching is the Dr. Fox lecture (Naftulin et al., 1973: 630): A trained actor gave an appealing presentation to students on a topic that he had no theoretical knowledge about. In a subsequent evaluation, students said that the lecture was good and that they have “learned something”, giving evidence to the dominant role of aesthetic appeal and personality rather than content. In the theatre, the medium is the message and the actors (Greek: hypocrites), who openly play their part, show that appearances may be deceiving. In the world of business and management (education) appearances can become real.

From a gender perspective I need to add that Dr Fox was a male actor playing out aesthetic stereotypes that also influence the success of men in both the business world and academia. When appearances are evaluated, male features such as broad shoulders, a certain height and even a prominent chin are commonly associated with “competence” and “success” while female appearances tend to be devalued and associated with lower qualifications (Von Rennenkampff, 2005). Female employees in particular suffer from these aesthetic judgements that are perpetuated not just by men but also are seen in women’s peer judgments (Mavin et al., 2013). That seems to be yet another backlash for female lecturers in today’s aesthetic educational era.

After all, teaching, managing and DJ’ing are all relational activities. It is not just about mixing tracks into each other, but is the art of “mixing music with people”. The party only works when people dance. Standing behind the turntables in a Berlin club, I learned the hard way. I have to admit that my DJ skills are very basic to say the least, but I managed to operate the Macbook with Traktor Scratch Pro, also with some support from a professional DJ who was hired as a backup so that ivory-tower academics would not botch it completely by creating holes of silence. As a feminist statement my set started with Salt N Peppa’s *Push it* that went well, then I made my way through DVBBS & Borgeous’s [*Tsunami*](#) and Marting Garrix & Jay Hardway’s [*Wizard*](#) that were received ecstatically. In a more ironic attempt I planned to mix [*Walk For Me*](#) by Tronco Traxx, which I have heard going really well in Berlin’s famous techno club Berghain (here is a link to a [recording by resident DJ Norman Nodge](#)) (I and fellow academics had previously visited Berghain for research purposes ... no irony whatsoever here!). However, impact of music obviously also is related to the atmosphere of a particular location and its “spirit” that is embodied by the crowd: students had a different taste and the energy in the room immediately decreased, dancing went slower, I encountered puzzled gazes that reminded me in familiar ways of a lecture when I mention the likes of Gernot Böhme (2003) for the first time. The DJ in the background hastily pointed out: “They do not know it, they don’t dance, go to the next track NOW!” My sweating fingers immediately started fiddling on the touchpad to “get back on track”, which I eventually managed to my great relief.

A DJ is nothing when the crowd does not dance, and a professor is nothing when students don’t “move”? I also caught myself dancing behind the DJ desk and I realized that the room started mirroring my movement, which made me move even more because I wanted them to dance and have a good party. This is where the “pastoral” DJ pose comes in: lifting your arms makes the crowd cheer as well. What a powerful feedback! In theatre studies where I have my background, the

atmospheric connection between stage and audience is called the “autopoietic feedback loop”. And there is another parallel to Dr Fox: I am not a skilled DJ, but dissembling and bringing in crowd-pleasing tunes makes everybody happy. My playlist had been set up by students I taught in an “Event Marketing” module at my institution BSP Business School Berlin, and they were involved backstage and contributed to the communication of the event with the agency beforehand, and even more importantly, danced to my last track *Everybody (Backstreet's Back)* onstage. In seminars we integrated literature on atmosphere and the staging of events so I would hope that the students have learned in the spirit of an adapted Chinese proverb: “I hear and I forget, I sing and I remember, I dance and I understand.” (Originally: “I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand.”). Personally I gained some “embodied knowing” by exploring DJ’ing as an artistic way of understanding more about aesthetics and management (this is why I chose, after students told me “you must have a hashtag”, [#ArtofManagement](#), which I use as a personal slogan on my t-shirt).

The sociologist Erving Goffman, who has written at great length on the “presentation of self in everyday life”, provides some perspective on the above ideas. In Shakespeare’s words, “All the world’s a stage”, and for women and men in Higher Education, the lecture theatre definitely is a stage. In Goffman’s (1981: 165) essay *The Lecture* it is emphasised that a lecture is a performance with many theatrical aspects. He suggested using rhetoric, though refraining from too strong an appeal to emotions, in order to create “calmly considered understanding, not mere entertainment”, to engage students and channel their thoughts towards insight, bringing them to a place that is not the lecture room but is beyond the lecture room in some theoretical realm.

A DJ set can be seen too as a “narrative” or a “journey” which is created as a joint endeavour to re-situate the dance floor as a place transported ideally from “here” to “there” (Gerard, 2004: 177). What it takes is a more underground approach to lecturing and to DJ’ing, something that is not only about the personality, the show and the appearances. From interviews that I conducted with DJs I gained a particular insight into parallels between managers and DJs: DJs do not only want to please crowds but, through programming choices and sophisticated mixing, they want to challenge the audience and develop their taste, lead them away into a different mental and bodily state. They bring in one or two “different” tunes so that it does not “sound too sleek and boring”. A DJ is nothing when the crowd does not dance, and a professor is nothing when students *are* not “moved”: Not just clapping their hands but gaining some embodied forms of understanding, not only in the moment in the lecture theatre but beyond. That is something that requires more than a superficial veneer of aesthetics.



Pictures by Blackbox Events, Professorenacht

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